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...Telentangled

Abstract

This short meditation considers examining televisual affect from the perspective of entanglement. As a concept in quantum physics, science and technology studies, and performance studies, entanglement is useful for understanding television's role in structuring affective, intersubjective relations between individuals and audiences alike. I use a science fiction short story authored by Jacob Clifton, a writer and recapper for *Television Without Pity*, to illustrate how entanglement emerges as a way to think television's affective liveness in a moment punctuated by profound technological, generic, formal, and industrial changes to the medium.

Television finds itself, in this particular moment in media history, on some sort of magical journey. Despite the fact that the last two decades have brought about significant changes to the medium of television—changes to its technological form, to how its programming is produced and distributed, to its generic and formal structures, and to its aesthetics and its critical reception—most those that watch television have not found themselves alienated by such changes. Rather, television arguably occupies a commanding position among both elites, who see artistic value in television's second (or third, according to some) "Golden Age" of complex serial storytelling, and the masses, who continue to enjoy cheap and globally formatted reality programming.

My point, though, is not to dwell on television's ability to satisfy multiple audiences (audiences who have, of course, diverse and occasionally competing entertainment interests), nor to claim some sort of teleological explanation for this. Instead, I want to consider, briefly, the utility of thinking about spectatorial engagement with television as one of *entanglement*, illustrated by a science fiction short story about reality television by Jacob Clifton, an author and television recapper. I use Clifton's story, in which a gay, interracial, genius couple examines

their relationship under the glare of a live reality TV event, to highlight television's potential to structure intersubjective relations between lovers, families, friends, and strangers—in short, to insist on the medium's (a)liveness through how it links people together.

On the surface, such a claim might appear to be rather obvious; like the weather, television has always been a way for total strangers to start up a conversation, be it around the proverbial water cooler or in an online discussion board. This short meditation, then, probes the surface of such a claim from the perspective of entanglement in order to understand differently how people relate to each other through TV. As a concept that has recently emerged in the lexicons of performance studies and science and technology studies (STS), as well as in the "harder" science of quantum physics, entanglement provides a compelling descriptor for how audiences relate to the apparatus. For one, entanglement gives language to the affective implications of the many changes to a television "after TV," as one notable anthology terms it.¹ At the same time, it provides for the reassertion of the canonical terms in the critical analysis of television: flow, intertextuality, fandom, adaptation, and so forth. To be entangled in television is to

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make sense of its structure, and to recognize how the experience of this making sense; the epistemological adventure that comes with tuning in, while difficult (and often laboriously so), is also deeply pleasurable.

The colloquial usage of “entangled” is primarily negative. Take, for example, some of the OED’s array of historical definitions of “entangle” and “entanglement”: “involved in difficulties; embarrassed, perplexed”; “interlaced; complicated, intricate”; “to involve in surroundings that impede movement, or from which extrication is difficult.” To be entangled in something, as the passive construction of such a condition implies, is to let external forces trap you into a singular place. Like critique, another labyrinthian process of navigating terrain full of complexities and stumbling blocks, entanglement suggests a full immersion within intricate universes, each with its own codes and vernacular. Television has always promised such immersions from its inception as a technological device of leisure, as audiences could, with the turn of a dial, be transported to other worlds: the Goldbergs’ apartment in the Bronx, the starship *Enterprise*, Gilligan’s Isle.² While the practices of channel surfing, as well as the wide array of programming that television offers, would seem to run counter to the sense of enclosure and limited movement that entanglement involves, television’s seductive flexibility as a mass medium of entertainment allows for movement *within* its multiple universes but rarely outside of the medium as a whole. That is to say, to be entangled in television is to consume its offerings addictively, moving from channel to channel while still being immersed fully in the medium itself.³

Within the discourses of STS, however, entanglement signifies something seemingly richer. In his study on entanglement, technology, and performance, Chris Salter notes that the discipline of STS seeks “to understand the complex entanglements among natural, social, technological, and corporeal forces that help shape the world.”⁴ For the past twenty-five years proponents of STS, including historians, anthropologists, and critical theorists, have investigated the vital activity of nonhuman entities, drawing attention to how they, just as much as humans (if not more), produce knowledge and exercise agency. Here, entanglement

shifts the paradigm of understanding the milieu of the social; rather than thinking of humans acting on objects unidirectionally, objects and humans are entangled with each other, with inseparable social relations. But beyond such proclamations of co-constitution, entanglement also draws attention to the role that studying objects has on the objects themselves, how critique, research, and the disciplines act and perform on the object of its enquiry that it seeks to describe.

Here, I want to consider the implications of such thinking on the study of television, a move that echoes Amy Villarejo’s persuasive call for an “ethereally queer” media practice. Of all the changes to television over the past few decades, none are as significant, she claims, as the shift from analog to digital television that occurred on June 12, 2009. The shift required audiences without subscription to cable or satellite to purchase a converter box in order to watch broadcast programming live, thus adding one more piece of technology—and, in many cases, one more obstacle—required to fulfill the medium’s promise of “free” programming delivered to the American home. Villarejo notes that such a move is an example of a “new form of enclosure...in the service of ravenous capitalist expansion” that requires a more comprehensive methodology to understand.⁵ This approach to studying television could encompass, for example, a hermeneutics of the nonhuman agents present in television: the technical and the technological alongside the industrial, the political/economic, the aesthetic, and the textual.

The move from a relational theorization of (nonhuman-human) subjectivity to a queer cultural studies of television requires attending to the affective pull between apparatus and audience. To watch television is, after all, first and foremost something a spectator *does*; it is an experience, albeit one highly controlled by the formal qualities of the medium. Indeed, uniquely characterizing television as experiential can be seen in its defining temporal structuration: rhythms of segmentation and flow that prompt spectators to answer the question “What did you do last night?” with the broad response “Oh, I watched some television,” rather than with more specific details about said programming. To dissect this generalized characterization of an experience critically requires

emphasizing elements of ritual and of audience reaction. Put differently, television's structure of feeling, resonant with the experience of watching television, must be perceived as emergent, serving as what Lauren Berlant describes as "a residue of common historical experience sensed but not spoken in a social formation, except as the heterogeneous but common practices of a historical moment would emanate them."⁶ The experience of watching television cannot be easily translated into spoken language, only into the vernacular of the present moment. Thus, how these social customs and forces give language to sensation results in the rich, but seemingly ephemeral, semiotic backdrop of the criticism of popular culture.

Given how television studies, with its origins in a Marxist cultural studies tradition, has, historically, insisted on foregrounding questions of representation within its criticism, what would it mean to think about the entanglement of representation with sensation, the entanglement of the ideological with the affective? I want to single out reality television as offering an appropriate example of this entanglement: denied the status of high value within most critical registers (while still occupying its position as the most popular and profitable genre of contemporary programming), it has always exploited the supple, if hazy, boundary between the real and the scripted that allows spectators to interpret what they find to be believable, authentic, and "real." As reality television can be read as symptomatic of cultural debates surrounding representation, it is also full of ordinary affects, to borrow Kathleen Stewart's term, that prop and shore up the authenticity of its subjects.⁷ When transposed to the register of relationality, the tenuous construction of "reality" present within the genre is the mercurial object with agency that exercises an impact over the more "human" impulse towards extreme narrative spectacle and celebrity that anchors the genre's popularity. While reality television cannot be strictly read as "realist" as defined by John Fiske, for whom a program is realist "not because it reproduces reality, but because it reproduces the dominant *sense* of reality," it can be read to generate and emulate reality simultaneously through the entanglement of representation and sensation it bestows upon its viewers.⁸

I use this rather elastic definition of reality television not to collapse the generic category under its own weight, but to highlight how the condition of being entangled in television has always necessitated a negotiation with "reality," in contrast to postmodern accounts of the medium that claim that television fabricates a layered, repetitive simulative structure that prohibits the surfacing of reality.⁹ While the immense popularity of reality television in the last two decades is considered to be one of the primary indicators of a televisual era "after TV"—connected to interactivity with digital platforms, the shift from the three-network system in the United States to one saturated with narrowcasting cable networks, and changes to the technological screen and mode of dissemination (such as with HDTV and TiVO)—"reality television" is not a "new" category.¹⁰ As historical readings of the genre have argued, from its introduction into American homes television has always moved between and beside information and entertainment, blending documentarian style with perverse spectacle. Thus the condition of televisual entanglement emerges from multiple angles: the entanglement of reality and of fantasy; of documentary and of spectacle; of the scripted and the unscripted; of the private and the public spheres; suggestive of the past and in the sensed present.

But while the sensed present may serve as the structure of feeling for televisual flow, it is important to remember that flow insists on a forward-moving serial repetition, what Richard Dienst would call the "uncanny sense that its essence has always already flowed out of reach."¹¹ Jacob Clifton's short story "While You Are Over There" stages an inquiry into the murky space of the out-of-reach, entangling together quantum physics, reality television, live spectacle, and artificial intelligence, subjecting them to the weight that inevitably burdens committed relationships.¹² The story flows into the future as a work of science fiction, but is still steeped in the economies of celebrity and liveness that partially and presently comprise today's televisual flow.

Within the story's narrative, television at first is just a medium, an accessory to the main conflict: the relationship between Kirby Brendan and Jonah Hope, two youngish scientific wunderkinds

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who have, effectively, solved many of the world's problems, problems that are both mundane (one of the couple's first inventions was "the pervasive-encryption ID field standard, the reason y'all don't have to use passwords anymore for anything[40]") and significant (they created an artificial intelligence daughter, Halley, who has installed a "mining laser [that] could cut a diamond from supraorbital distances, with a targeting system that can see pretty much through everything"[9]). As Kirby and Jonah rise in celebrity stature, they attract the cameras of reality TV, to record-shattering ratings, but also for the greater good, too, as the profits from their reality television specials fund their scientific and technological innovation. (A nerdy, gay, interracial couple—Kirby is white, Jonah is black—is the world's most famous celebrity couple; clearly, space stations and possible alien contact are not the only signs of science fiction at work here.) Kirby and Jonah are part of a larger economy, the media frenzy that follows their every move, and as geek royalty have created the media event of the year: a reunion on their space station, the *Paragon Interrupt*. As Jonah launches off from Jacksonville, Florida (in the *Jackknife Orbital*, a spaceship designed by the two), Kirby fields questions from his fans before talking with his AI daughter, Halley, who has realized (correctly, it turns out) that things are not so good between her two fathers. Unable to accept the dissolution of her family, Halley quietly takes the world hostage, threatening catastrophe unless Kirby and Jonah reconcile their differences.

The aforementioned paragraph reads as a recap, but so, too, does Clifton's story, an assemblage of real time events—the launch of the *Orbital*, Kirby and Halley's conversation, and the live coverage of the reunion hosted by the story's narrator, the journalist (and de facto host of the program) Kenzie Saltwick—and flashbacks of the past—memories from Kirby and Jonah's relationship, and earlier interviews between Kenzie and Kirby, who queerly flirt over off the record conversations with wine. The style is not surprising, perhaps, because Clifton is a popular recapper with the website *Television Without Pity*, one of the more active fan headquarters in cyberspace. Recapping is a trademark currency of convergence television, a testament to television as digital medium. It is

also, as Mark Andrejevic has noted, a way for the industry to take the pulse of fan communities, a way in which "creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy."¹³

As textual practice, recapping expands the boundaries of both authorship and criticism, giving viewers a playful way to make sense of a narrative program. As an art form, recapping is also an elevated form of criticism, often wielding sarcastic humor as hermeneutic weapon; it stretches the surface of criticism through an intertextual language translatable to both producers and fans. As a style, recapping demands intersubjectivity, the desire for fans to be a part of a larger industrial and creative apparatus as well as the desire for producers to construct expansive fan communities.¹⁴ This intersubjectivity is present throughout the entire story, and it serves as a desire for the connection with something deeper, with something cosmic, perhaps. Kirby and Jonah's fans see the celebrities as larger than life figures: "if superheroes are the closest we have to gods," one fan drunkenly muses, then Kirby and Jonah "were the closest thing we had to superheroes. *Are(3)*." What I want to suggest through this odd trajectory—an aesthetics of recapping, intersubjective relations, and legendary superheroes—is how Clifton's story frames television as phenomenologically inducing sensation, as the engine for a strong public affect that unites. Part of this affect comes from the unfolding of the launch in real time and in Clifton's invocation of TV's liveness: during a commercial break, Kenzie pays homage to the talents of her director and his crew, stating that they make real-time decisions "like music...like watching someone at the piano, but with images and scenes(12)." Here, the live broadcast unfolds musically, with the task of editing componentially complex live footage compared to the pianist who beats and releases notes from a machine.

Like the piano, television is an instrument for affect, the entanglement of matter and meaning, an agent that becomes embodied to the human protagonist as a sensation machine. Halley, a product of artificial intelligence, senses Kirby and Jonah's distance; she watches the show against her father's wishes, and through her participation as an audience member she can intuit the truth about

their relationship, while using her circuitry to monitor their movements. Halley uses television to marry together computation and affectivity, two concepts that, as Elizabeth Wilson has demonstrated, are co-present within technological systems and organisms.¹⁵ But if Halley is alive, hers is a vitality of feeling, vibrant in sensation. The story uses Halley as a repository for engaging with other forms of life she has detected: aliens who have warned her about an approaching unidentified object entering the solar system, and she has formed (perhaps with the help of the extraterrestrials) her own artificial intelligence creature, a baby named Rachel. Halley's position as a conduit for other beings, and especially other beings that exist between human and machine, reveal how technical media (Halley is programmed; she is representation through code) induce powers of intuition that yield a proximate intimacy, a "kind of archiving mechanism for the affects that are expressed in habituated and spontaneous behavior that appears to manage the ongoing present," in Berlant's words.¹⁶

But while Halley represents television's ability to archive the possibilities for connection between individual spectators and other worlds, she also represents the deteriorating relationship between her two fathers, similar to that of Pat and Bill Loud, the couple that anchored the first reality docusoap, PBS's *An American Family* (1973), a family revealed by reality television to be falling apart.¹⁶ In one particularly poignant flashback in the story, Kirby and Jonah address the fact that they are particles, polar opposites in temperament and in physical shape and color. Jonah attempts to explain to Kirby a new design, an electronic-free quantum computer smartphone:

[Jonah] "Take a particle, put it through something, with another particle. Just a simple thing that everybody can see. A travail, a siege perilous. And those two things are forever entangled. Like with a fiber coupler, like we did on those textiles, or quantum dots to trap them for a minute. And those two things are forever entangled. When somebody looks at you, spinning clockwise, I'm spinning the other way."

[Kirby] "But doesn't that mean I'm going the opposite way? Doesn't that mean we're fleeing from each other?"

"No, I like that we spin opposite ways, it's why we're a good team. But that's not what is interesting, what's interesting is that I am doing whatever I am doing, while you are over there, spinning the other way. And the only person that knows this..."

"Is the person that's watching. The one that's looking at us both. At the palimpsest."

"We don't need to know. We just are. We are filling the spots. We are twisting the perfect ways. It's only interesting to them, to the observer. The one that doesn't see us, when we're alone. When we're working, here, or out in the world."

"Like a particle doesn't care which way time runs."

"Or how far: While you are over there, I am yet still entangled (31)."

The spinning between particles is one that unfolds in real time (even if that "real" time is backwards), and the relational structure between particles emerges through movement, acceleration, and speed, all of which are hallmarks of the technological figuration of the medium and particularly of liveness. But, as Jane Feuer has famously argued, liveness is both television's ontology as well as its ideology, and thus imagined communities of viewers—the royal "we" of television audiences—can be stitched together by particles of light, the pixels that comprise the transmission of programming.¹⁷ In quantum physics, entanglement "is a property of quantum theory that allows two particles (such as photons) to be much more strongly correlated than is possible in classical physics."¹⁸ While "we" are "over there"—an over there that is at once mobile and domestic—this correlation becomes possible to detect.

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But detecting such a correlation between particles requires the ability to sense. And the only person capable of sensing the spinning, the correlation between two people, is the “observer,” the spectator who sits enmeshed in the couple’s relation, be it Halley, or the drunken fan who adores Kirby and Jonah as if they were superheroes or gods. To watch television is to recognize its power to entangle, to spin alongside and away from other worlds in an ongoing present where it doesn’t matter which way time runs. Through its science fiction lens, Clifton’s story gives us a television that is not just live, but *a-live*, and through its

intersubjective call presents a template for better understanding how television brings together disparate audiences, audiences who spin opposite ways yet are still deeply interacting with the world surrounding them, yet still entangled. Stretched in the ongoing present, the feeling generated by this quantum television, a television strong in intuition, is akin to the magic promised by its inventors.¹⁹ And thus this alchemical property of television can be located in how TV structures relations between stars, viewers, and the particles of light that emanates from other worlds while ending up, finally, on our screens.

Hunter Hargraves is a doctoral student in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. His research interests sit at the intersection of television studies, affect, and cultural identity. He is currently working on a dissertation on “viscerally uncomfortable television,” which explores the relationship between millennial television, spectatorial discomfort, and neoliberalism.

Notes

1 The phrase “after TV” was coined in the edited collection *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). See also the edited collection *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2 And with the expansion of programming via cable networks in the late 1970s and 1980s, these immersive experiences were much more likely to occur, as one could spend days trapped within the culinary customs of the Food Network, or the youth culture of MTV, and so on.

3 Of course, technological changes have added more platforms for viewers to engage with television, often mediated through other devices (mobile phones, computers) and interfaces (social media). One could thus make the argument that current practices of television watching are steeped in distraction, and that audiences have a more fragmented relationship to the programs they watch. Such an argument, however, neglects the fact that TV flow, the primary way in which the medium structures the audience’s sense of time, has always been complicated by the possibility of distraction since its inception, such as in work by Tania Modleski and Anna McCarthy that demonstrates how television can organize a viewer’s daily routine. See Tania Modleski, “The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women’s Work,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983), 67–84; and Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

4 Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), xxvii.

5 Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–2. Villarejo, too, notes the importance of theorizing the medium as a technology with relational potential, noting how TV’s “paradoxical role, the role of technics... might be put as follows: technics, apparently a force or power in the service of humanity, becomes detached, autonomous from the instance it empowers” (10).

6 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 65.

7 Misha Kavka has read the uncontrollable expressions of reality television’s subjects as one example of the affective climate engendered by reality television: “the reality of the camera-performer relation in reality TV is thus twofold: it inheres on the one hand in the affective syntax of performative gestures, those ‘tics and gestures and wrinkles,’ at the same time it registers the everyday negotiations of *being watched* by an unowned gaze, which structures subjectivity itself.” See Misha Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 100.

8 John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 21. Emphasis mine.

9 See Jean Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media and the Information of the Social in the Masses,” in *Myths of Information: Technology and Post-Industrial Culture*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 137–48.

10 Lynn Spigel, “Introduction,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2–4.

11 Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 27.

12 Jacob Clifton, “While You Are Over There,” novella published by *Gumroad* 2014. All citations refer to the .pdf version of the

story.

13 Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television and New Media* 9.1 (2008), 25.

14 This occurs even when viewers are absent from the program itself, reading recaps online in lieu of watching a program to which they may not have as strong of an attachment, for example.

15 Wilson, too, notes the entanglement of thinking and feeling, saying that they "don't just abut or supplement or lean on each other. Rather, they are projected and introjected *into* each other. See Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 22.

16 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 17.

17 And thus prompting a question that cannot be explored here, but is nevertheless worth asking: how might reality television be structured around the breakdown of the American family?

18 Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television*, 12-24.

19 J.G. Rarity, "Getting Entangled in Free Space," *Science*, 301:5633 (2003), 604.

20 As Lynne Joyrich puts it, "It is [the] imbrication of the margin and the center, the normative and the strange, the existent and the emergent, the rational and the irrational (or, more precisely, the nonrationalized) that magical realism registers – and it is also precisely this imbrication that defines the televisual today." See Lynne Joyrich, "The Magic of Television: Thinking Through Magical Realism in Recent TV," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 3 (2009).